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RUEHRI/AMCONSUL RIO DE JANEIRO 5070
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SUBJECT: DEPUTIES PROPOSE TRIP TO CUBA TO INVESTIGATE
BOXERS' RETURN

Classified By: Political Counselor Stephen Liston, reasons 1.4 B and D

¶1. (C) Summary. A delegation of Brazilian federal deputies could travel to Havana soon to learn more about the Cuban boxers who were returned to Cuba during the PanAm games after apparently trying to defect and then undergoing a change of heart. The deputies would try to see the boxers to determine whether they have suffered any retaliation from the Cuban government, but the president of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies may not allow the trip for budgetary reasons. Although the opposition is keeping the incident alive in the press, its criticism of the GOB has not resonated much outside of congress. End summary.

¶2. (C) Deputies from the Chamber of Deputies Foreign Relations and National Defense Committee (CREDN) could visit Cuba in September to gather information about the circumstances of the return of two Cuban boxers who competed in the PanAm Games last July, then apparently tried to defect, but suddenly changed their minds. Last week, the CREDN approved a resolution on the Cuba trip, but an adviser to Arlindo Chinaglia, president of the Chamber of Deputies and a member of President Lula's Workers Party, told us that Chinaglia, as Chamber president, must approve all official foreign travel and might well disallow this trip for budgetary reasons. The adviser said politics would not be an issue in the decision and that the presidential palace was not likely to pressure Chinaglia to block the trip. However, the CREDN chairman has already traveled extensively, and the Chamber is facing growing budgetary constraints.

¶3. (SBU) When the boxers, Guillermo Rigondeaux and Erislandy Lara, asked to go home after having gone missing, Brazilian authorities quickly facilitated their request and sent them away on a Venezuelan aircraft reportedly chartered by the Cuban government. Intense congressional and media attention in the aftermath raised questions about the actions of Brazilian authorities and the circumstances leading up to the boxers' return. Press reports described a scenario in which the boxers may or may not have had a drunken night out on the town, decided not to return to Cuba, discussed contracts with a German promoter, applied for visas to Germany, then suddenly changed their minds and told Brazilian Federal Police (PF) they wanted to go back to Cuba. Local press reports said Rigondeaux and Lara had felt pressured after family members in Cuba told them by phone that the government had reduced their food rations and were threatening to expel them from their homes. The PF, which is under the Justice Ministry, arranged their immediate return. Both houses of congress have called GOB

officials to testify on their actions; Justice Minister Tarso Genro defended the government's actions as being totally within the law, and noted that other Cubans who sought asylum have been allowed to stay (note: Rafael D'Acosta Capote, a handball player, and Lazaro Lamelas, a coach). Foreign Minister Amorim is due to testify later this month. Members of congress continue to spar over whether the GOB did the right thing and whether Brazil complied with international norms of behavior.

¶4. (C) Comment. Although it remains unclear at what level decisions were made in the GOB, and what role the Cuban government played, it seems most likely that the Justice ministry did not look behind the boxers' sudden change of heart, and simply took the path of least resistance. The Ministry of External Relations's unusual public statement after the event, in which it denied any part in the decision, seems to support this view. By operating in its usual conflict-avoidance mode and trying to rid itself of a potential problem, the Brazilian government may have brought on itself unwelcome scrutiny from congressional oppositionists who might wish to show the government acting against freedom-loving Cubans. The proposed congressional trip is the latest gambit by congressional opposition to keep the Cuban boxers incident alive. So far, however, the effort does not seem to be resonating much outside the halls of congress.

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